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THE RELIGION OF A SCEPTIC

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THE RELIGION OF A SCEPTIC

The old controversy between Fundamentalists and Modernists has recently broken out again, as bitter and malignant as ever; and it does seem advisable at this juncture to give a few plain hints to these disputants as to exactly how their theological bickerings affect the nerves of ordinary outsiders!

What these ecclesiastics must be given to understand is briefly this; that to the majority of intelligent minds—and this includes a far greater number of average men and women than they realize—the whole quarrel is utterly outworn and tedious!

What any person endowed with moderate discernment is bound to feel is that the Fundamentalists are so stiffly conventional, that they lack the clairvoyance to understand the real human value of the thing they are defending. They just defend it professionally, blindly, instinctively; as if it were some sacred idol or tribal image, the very expression of whose features, carved by some early inspired artist, they had lost all power of interpreting.

So much for the Fundamentalists.

But what the sensitive outsider feels about the

Modernists in this debate is even less complimentary.

If the defenders of Dogma defend it blindly, clumsily, childishly; the enemies of Dogma attack it with a crudity, an insolence, a theatrical sentimentality, such as show that they, like their opponents, have not the remotest idea as to the real place in human life of the thing they are criticizing.

Now what exactly is the attitude of the peaceful and sceptical minority whose reactions I am trying to represent, to the dramatic activities of these modern preachers?

I think I can best indicate what I mean by imagining the actual case of some visitor to New York, a visitor neither more nor less unbelieving than the average but with a deep instinctive reverence for the traditions of the church of Christendom.

Imagine such an one wandering about the city of New York on some casual Sunday afternoon; and drifting, first into Trinity Church, and then, a little later, into St. Mark's. What would his feelings, his dominant instinctive emotions be, in the two edifices?

Would he not in the first case put easily aside, as something to be taken wearily for granted, the explanatory harangue from the orthodox pulpit, while he gave himself up to the famil-

iar and beautiful words of the ancient liturgy?

But, in the second case, moving hesitatingly into the porch of the mellow eighteenth-century building on Second Avenue, already faintly suspicious of the queer "Dutch Pink" with which they have tricked up that monument of quiet customs, would he not be teased and disconcerted, as soon as he got inside, as though by something quite alien to his mood of poetic reverie?

Would it not seem to him that between what he sought just there—a consolatory sense of the binding together of the generations—and the humility of his expectation, there obtruded itself an element that was more adapted to the eclectic platform of some new Psychic Cult than to an altar where Jeremy Taylor could have worshipped or where Bishop Ken could have prayed?

If such a visitor had turned away rather peevishly from the orthodox discourse of his first venture, he would turn away now, we may be quite sure, with a much more indignant emotion.

In the first case no amount of pedantic explanation could interfere with the sober dignity of the time-hallowed words. In the second case between these words and his own reserved and taciturn piety there had intervened so many distracting modern sensations that the familiar charm was altogether destroyed.

To the mind of our imaginary visitor the great

traditional dogmas—dogmas that have preoccupied the human race for so many centuries—would of necessity have their curious interest. But this re-interpreting of these traditions in terms of the most transitory of all modern fashions would present itself to his mind as something ill-gendered and teasing.

If Christianity developed, as Newman once thought it did; it surely developed—so our visitor would remind himself as he turned away from the pink church—along its own intrinsic lines; “moving altogether if it moved at all,” and not bouncing up and down like a child’s balloon!

But suppose the whole idea of religious emotion were involved in its *not* changing; not changing even by slow evolutionary progress, but remaining the one quiet, dignified human tradition that retained for us the calm refuge of an antiquity “old as the hills”?

Being the sceptic he is and brought up—let us suppose—in the Anglican Faith, these considerations would not necessarily drive this good man post-haste into the nearest edifice that acknowledged the Pope; but they would at least make him understand how it is that almost every Roman Church, in every city in the world, is an unconscious hostelry of the past, where unaggressive unbelievers, going in and going out, are per-

mitted to breathe the fragrance of old tradition without being harassed to attack, to defend, or to explain!

The point which I have been trying, in this indirect manner, to make clear, is that there are among us a vast number of sensitive-minded people whose unbelief has reached such a level of disillusionment that all these modern attempts to bolster up religion by appeals to our love of sensation leave them not only cold but sickened and disgusted.

One is thankful enough that sufficient simple-minded people still exist to keep the old traditions alive; but what one wants to feel, when one enters these temples of our fathers, is the solemn pathos of the passing of the ages, "the still sad music of humanity"; not any new-fangled ethical chatter.

These theatrical gestures in the presence of things as beautiful as the Nicene Creed, or the Service for the Dead, or the Litany, or the English Collects, seem to any one, who is at all reverent in these matters, as no better than ill-timed levities and vulgar fooleries!

The Christianity that Anatole France laughed at, the Christianity that Dostoievsky loved, is a desperate, imaginative challenge to the whole uniformity of Cause and Effect in this tragic world; a challenge that has made itself into a rich vast

dim promontory stretching out into the unknown; every portion of whose scarred surface has grown familiar to us; every ledge, every ridge, the scene of some historic crisis in our race's history.

Surely the hour has come when the disillusioned of our human family, standing on this promontory between sea and sky, have become sceptical enough to treat doubt itself with a certain æsthetic detachment, sceptical enough to regard with instinctive hostility any attempt to analyze too curiously the chemical constituents of the rock-ramparts of their ancient home.

For what is left for us in this collapse of all credible supernaturalism? To grow just flip-pantly indifferent to the passing of old observances? To ignore completely the deep-rooted milestones whereby our ancestors gave dignity and measure to their days?

I cannot think so.

In the disappearance of all rational justification for the dogmas of the faith, it still remains that we can appreciate their daring poetry; it still remains that we can use them—our intellects undrugged by their seduction—as natural and seemly ways of heightening the inevitable succession of human events upon the earth.

The moment we come to feel, with what Newman used to call our "illative sense," that the

balance of probabilities is against our arriving at any sort of certitude in these high matters, *that* moment we are liberated from the necessity of either explaining away these dogmas or of rendering them more rational.

A rational faith is a contradiction in terms. The essence of any faith is that it should be irrational. If it is *not* irrational it leaves a certain subterranean craving in us unsatisfied.

To the whole-hearted rationalist all faith is hocus-pocus, and it always must remain a very open question whether the rationalist is not right!

But right or wrong, it is clear that to *his* mind the Resurrection of the Body and the Virgin Birth are so much discredited balderdash; and it is only when we are in a position to undermine the scepticism of the rationalist with a scepticism deeper than his own that we become free to enjoy the beauty of these ideas without denying them some possible residuum of reality.

The simple-minded religious people upon whose piety the whole continuance of the thing depends are ready to stake their personal faith against all discussion.

But the sceptical minority whose feelings I am attempting to articulate have already completely lost their faith and have not the least wish to regain it.

The "Will to Believe" is dead in them. They no longer wish Christianity to *be* true. *They are glad it is not true.*

What such minds are confronted by is the alternative of complete indifference and the alternative of mock-faith, or theatrical faith.

This "mock-faith" is ignoble, because in its fidgetty and fussy preoccupations with the little ritualistic details of religion it tends to miss altogether the larger human pathos of the whole spectacle.

The curious thing is that the people who still retain their faith and the people who seek to rationalize their faith, both seem to miss the larger outlook. Such an outlook is perhaps dependent upon what Nietzsche used to call "the pathos of distance." Perhaps it can only be enjoyed by those whose scepticism goes far beyond the defence or rejection of this or that individual dogma.

For what the Modernists lack the wit to see is that any real unbelief does not confine itself to explaining away the Virgin Birth or the Resurrection of the Body. It menaces the whole edifice of Christian mysticism. It questions the whole edifice of Christian morals. And it is only when scepticism like this does go to the root of the whole matter that there arises that peculiar kind of awareness, grave, tender, pitiful, de-

tached, to which is revealed the true imaginative beauty of religion.

The pietists who take their faith for granted see nothing of this. The Modernists who criticize particular dogmas see nothing of this. It is a thing revealed only to those whose minds have the power of visualizing the whole stream of existence as something alien to the desires of the human heart.

The truth is, we have reached a level of human consciousness when for minds of a certain imaginative tincture what we call Theology has become Mythology, what we call Morality has become Casuistry, and what we call Redemption has become the adjustment of a particular type of temperament to the chaotic jumble of life.

To regard religion as mythology does not make it less important. It gives it a new and lovely glamour. It restores to it the enchantment which it possessed at the beginning when its dogmas had not yet lost their natural poetry in the laboratory of theological speculation.

No cultivation of the æsthetic sense in the presence of life can afford to neglect some deliberate heightening and enhancing of the basic elements of our experience, such as birth, love, food, fire, shelter, procreation, death. And these are precisely the things that, as they present themselves one by one, Religion in its rôle of

Mythology appropriates to itself and consecrates. Christianity is reduced to an impoverished philosophy when it does not make use of the sacramental idea and this is the thing that gives the Roman, Anglican and Greek churches their advantage over the rest.

Over all the rest except the Quakers!

No one with any feeling for human dignity and charm can fail to be arrested by the peculiar æsthetic quality of this long-persecuted sect. Their invincible courage, mingled with so much humorous sagacity—the wisdom of the serpent with the harmlessness of the dove—their extraordinary freedom from the grosser kinds of popular prejudice, put these gentle and subtle people altogether outside the pale of commonplace protestation.

Their very “Waiting upon the Spirit” becomes a sort of psychological sacrament, whereby the brutal uproar of the world is transfigured into an abysmal Silence; silence, the original and mysterious oracle of all high ecstasies!

And just as religion in its rôle of mythology aids the æsthetic sense by touching with its far-drawn long-lingering sunset all those fragments and morsels of pitiful beauty which in the history of our race have gathered themselves together, like sea-wrack and sea-tangle, upon “earth’s hu-

man shores," so it has the power of calling to our attention, in its diurnal offices, all those various episodes in the day's life; dawn, morning, noon, twilight, midnight; which, without some sort of disinterested recognition of their hurried passing tend to vanish so wistfully, so absolutely!

"Laud we the gods and let our crookéd smokes . . . climb . . . to their blest altars!"

And not less, when it comes to the annual procession of the seasons, does religion play her immemorial part as the great æsthetic prompter to the world-stage.

It seems as if even our most sympathetic rationalists are guilty of forgetting what we owe to religion in this slow-unfolding drama of the year's life and death.

The birth of our god at Christmas; his death on Good Friday; his resurrection at Easter; these events and all the great festivals that follow from Lady's Day to Michaelmas, have so interwoven themselves with the lives of our ancestors that they have become part and parcel of the seasons themselves; have passed into these seasons, losing something of their realistic value but attaining a far greater poetic beauty.

And this is why one feels that to grow peevish and captious about such a thing as the Virgin Birth is not so much an insult to any remote

problematical Celestial Powers as an insult to the poetic common-sense of the human race itself.

For ultimately, as our average sceptic knows perfectly well, it is the human race which has invented the figure of Christ and all the mysteries connected with that figure.

This by no means implies that the Christ of the mediæval tradition, that creation of the anonymous imagination of the centuries, is less precious to the world than the historic Jesus. He is *more* precious. He is the supreme work of art of the human race. And he is this whether the historic event at Bethlehem in Judæa took place or did not take place!

Around that unique figure have gathered all the wistful and desperate longings of the heart of man for nearly two thousand years; and it is towards this Christ of the centuries—a totally different person from the patient prophet of the gospels—that our imagination turns with such a sense of rich strange excitement.

It begins to grow clear now why it is that our æsthetic feelings are so shocked and outraged by the Modernist's questioning of the Virgin Birth or the bodily Resurrection.

As long as we are sceptical enough, in the historical and theological sense, to sweep away with one grand swing of the intelligence, both the lit-

eral interpretation and the allegorical interpretation, we shall not be teased at all by these logical difficulties.

Our Christ will be neither the mystical Son of Heaven of orthodox theology nor the sympathetic philanthropist of heretical hero-worship. He will be a natural and veritable god, a creation not of piety at all, still less of philosophy, but of poetry and the imagination.

We are confronted by precisely the same situation as that which confronted the Greek and Roman sceptics; and we shall be wise if we take the attitude of Sophocles and Virgil rather than that of Lucretius and Lucian!

Directly one leaves the arid rocks of argumentative assertion and denial; directly one approaches the shadowy margins of actual human sensibility, all that I have been trying to articulate takes its place among what might be called "the silences of the soul."

Humanity in reality can never worship anything except the magic of the universe. The traditional images in which this magic has been caught and held will always have a pathos of their own, such as no argument can either justify or destroy. And this pathos, this emanation of beauty, is something completely independent both of faith and of un-faith.

The attitude I am defending is an attitude that

would give to anyone who had, as a child, been baptized into the church and who had, in later years, desired to be buried by the church, a right to regard himself as an adherent of all that was most important in the faith of his fathers!

It is an attitude profoundly sympathetic to what is known as "Erastianism"; and profoundly unsympathetic to the self-consciousness of sacerdotalism or the self-consciousness of revivalism.

It is an attitude, in other words, that bears a close resemblance to that adopted in ancient Rome by the poets Horace and Virgil towards the gods of *their* race. It is an historical, traditional, *natural* attitude and not a mystical or metaphysical one.

But the claim I am making for this particular way of feeling would not be as plausible as it is if the feeling were confined to poets of high genius. The emotion I am describing is surely one that can be felt by quite ordinary intelligences when once they have grasped the peculiar pathos of our human situation.

There is not the remotest reason why we should believe that the sacrament of Baptism makes any occult or mystic difference in the fate of a child; or that the Burial Service does anything to alter the obscure destiny of the vanished soul; or that Marriage before a priest affects the good luck or the ill luck of the lovers whose love it consecrates.

For the very reason that our attitude to these solemn offices is *disinterested* we find a beauty in them which resembles the beauty of certain objects in Nature; objects which do not ask that we should do anything more than just accept them and pass on.

It almost seems as if a person's mind has to follow four stages of development before it apprehends the true secret of religion.

The first stage might be called emotional belief. The second might be called metaphysical belief. The third, absolute disillusionment. The fourth, *æsthetic understanding*.

And this last stage implies a recognition that it is by means of the poetry of these slowly accumulated traditions that the existence of man upon the earth is heightened and the confusion of what he undergoes reduced to an endurable pattern.

With regard to the word "æsthetic" in this connection it must not be supposed that what is meant by this expression is a sensuous response to coloured windows, to the smell of incense, to fine singing, to gorgeous vestments, to dramatic gestures, to gracious architecture. A response to these things is quite as likely to disturb and interrupt the mental attitude I have been describing as to encourage or sustain it.

In fact what one really requires, in order to get

the full æsthetic reaction from these ancient usages, is that they should be performed automatically and mechanically, with as little emphasis as possible upon the mere *beauty of ritual*.

The æsthetic sense, to which the true dignity and pathos of religion appeals, is completely unconcerned with the "artistic" element in Christian worship. It is occupied with something much more serious than this. It is occupied with the fact that man has so deeply associated his goings out and comings in, his health and his sickness, his memories and his hopes, with these particular festivals, that they have become the illuminated marginal hieroglyphs to the very scroll of his Life-Illusion.

They have indeed fallen into their place, along with the remembered landscapes, and the yet more familiar groupings of animals, houses, gardens, streets, as evocative of that vague inherited race-consciousness which comes and goes so mysteriously about certain material things; and which extends backwards so far into the womb of prenatal darkness.

And because these periodic festivals have been associated with the whole secular history of our lives the feeling we have come to entertain about them is something more massive and more natural than any merely ethical emotion.

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It may be true, or it may not be true, that the "logoi" of Jesus interpret the mystery of the universe with more surety than any other human oracles.

It may be true, or it may not be true, that the particular kind of love advocated and manifested by Jesus represents some psychic force that can actually work miracles.

The ancient religious customs I am now considering do not in the least *depend* upon the doctrines of Jesus.

They depend upon nothing outside themselves. What they are they are; milestones, made of the stuff whereof all flesh is made, holding the attention of the wayfarer to-day as they held the attention of the wayfarer of yesterday; binding together all the days of all the years of our life; storing up in a language heavy with memories, the burden of that which was and is and is to come!

It is only permitted to a few among the sons of men to realize the strange deep secret of Jesus. It is only permitted to a few to understand the mystery of the love of the saints.

But it is permitted to all to stand at gaze, for a passing moment, before these weather-worn monoliths of the journey we all have to make. It is permitted to all to use the dogma of the Virgin Birth, the sacrament of Infant Baptism,

the ritual of the Burying of the Dead, the great Feasts of Chrîstmas, of Easter, of Pentecost, so as to summon up "remembrance of things past"; so as to mingle some Nepenthe for the evil present; so as to cast some healing premonition over what is yet to be.

When an event like the Virgin Birth, when an event like the Resurrection has thus become a part of the body and pressure of the years, it becomes something very different from a metaphysical theory or an ethical appeal. It does nothing to explain the mystery of life. It does nothing to build up our moral character. And yet, in a certain sense, it does more for us than any philosophy, then any heroic urge. It acts upon us like some subtle work of art. It reconciles us to the confusion of our days and to the labour of our days by enabling us to see these things in a certain spacious perspective.

To ask oneself anxious questions about the exact meaning of the Incarnation or the precise significance of the Resurrection is like teasing oneself with the textual difficulties of some great poem whose style and whose imagery have become part of the very language we use.

Art always has this, that it satisfies a craving in us that is beyond the sphere of rational explanation. And these dogmas of the church, these festivals of the church, are Humanity's

smoke-dark picture upon the walls of its far-travelled caravan.

And the centre of this picture is the Celebration of the Mass, whether Roman or Greek or English!

If you conceived of some great cosmic drama that had in it the sublimity of "Prometheus Bound," the grandeur of "King Lear," the huge concords of the music of Beethoven; and then added to such a work all that was most wistful and tender in the spirit of the old country ballads, you would still find that you had fallen short of conveying to the mind the sort of beauty which is contained in this extraordinary gesture.

But to understand the Mass, to be affected by the Mass, it is not in the least necessary that you should hold any particular view of the miracle of Transubstantiation.

You may doubt whether there *is* any miracle. It is enough that this great drama has been performed for so many centuries that it has created round it an enchanted circle of man's reverence for man, into which all spectators of it, however sceptical, seem bound to come, if they have not hardened their hearts against the burden of their own race.

For the Mass, however and whenever it is celebrated, remains an eternal witness to a certain quite definite human experience; an experience

that has entered the secretest nerves of all such lives as have been hard put to it by fate; the experience, namely, of finding relief from one's own personal trouble in the vision of some great reservoir of superhuman passion.

Such a vision becomes to us as if we beheld in a dim vast mirror the wounded heart of a universe that had turned and rent itself in a cataclysm of desperate pity.

And thus it comes about that to tone down with a semi-scientific earnestness the various great mediæval doctrines that have descended to us through the ages is to undermine the whole beauty of the Mass.

The Mass depends upon the Virgin Birth. It depends upon Vicarious Atonement. It depends upon the Resurrection. To extenuate or to expurgate these traditional dogmas is to make this smoke-darkened picture upon the walls of the world a grotesque travesty of superstition.

It is precisely when you have carried your unbelief so far as to feel doubtful about the existence of God, doubtful about Immortality, doubtful about any sort of moral order, that these wavering outlines so strangely limned upon the arras of time regain their æsthetic ascendancy.

When the differences between old-fashioned and new-fashioned theologies begin to appear ridiculous, when the whole fabric of Christian

ethics is shaken to its foundations, then is the moment when the dogmas of the creed and the sacraments of the church appear in all their touching beauty.

But it must not for a moment be assumed that the humanistic attitude towards religion advocated here is identical with those neo-catholic movements in France which embrace such eloquent apologists as Paul Claudel, Paul Verlaine, and Paul Bourget!

It is no more identical with these than it is identical with the impassioned perversities of the Apostle Paul.

The attitude towards religion advocated here is altogether hostile to those theatrical self-lacerations—so different from the planetary cataclysms in Dostoievsky—which lend so dainty and so fragrant an unction to the beguiling cadences of French style.

One can call it the “humanistic” attitude; but it might just as well be called the “Shakespearean”; for no one who has saturated himself in the mood of the Plays and the Sonnets can have failed to miss that peculiar flavour, that tender, indefinable after-taste, with its curious sense of cowslips and cuckoo-flowers in green-wet grass, which seems to blend a certain scepticism with a certain reverence, as those things have never been blended before!

Let us suppose a sceptic of the type I am seeking to represent to enter some hotel-hall in a mining or factory district in America and to glance casually at the notices of religious services hung upon the wall.

Why is it that he will find himself impervious to the imposing programs of the various Protestant denominations, and regard with a sharp arrest of all secular consciousness the simple announcement that Mass will be celebrated at such and such an hour in those innumerable little edifices—Italian, German, French, Slovak, Bohemian, Armenian, Syrian, Spanish, Lithuanian, Irish, English, Roumanian, Sicilian—which hold the secret of so terrific, so formidable a shock to the habitual processes of things, that it is as if a yawning fissure were to appear in the very fabric of Nature.

That the invisible essence of bread and wine should, by a miracle, before one's eyes, be converted into the flesh and blood of a god is no light thing, even in the purlieus of a Youngstown, Ohio, or a Scranton, Pa.

And the more aware one has become as to the extent to which the foundations of belief have been overturned, the more affecting it is to contemplate the mere idea of such an extraordinary event.

But though to the mind of the sceptic the cele-

bration of Mass is arresting and startling as no theological discourse can possibly be, what the sceptic makes use of to resist the temptation to commit himself any further is not just simply his "reason."

It is necessary to be quite clear about this point. An apologist for religion might say: "If you go as far as this why will you not go the whole way?"

Our reply to this is whole-hearted enough. "I will not go the whole way because it is not only with my reason that I object to 'practising religion.' It is with my imagination, with my instinct, with my intuition, with my æsthetic sense, with my emotional sense, with every vague, subtle, evasive, spiritual intimation which I possess!"

It is precisely here that the attitude of mind we are considering, an attitude that instinctively selects the humanistic philosophy of Shakespeare as its ideal, separates itself from the type of temperament, like that of Huysmans on the one hand or Chesterton on the other, which does eventually *commit itself*.

Such a plunge would be, as far as we are concerned, a betrayal of our inmost integrity, a sacrifice of the rhythm of our nature to a pathological craving.

What it really amounts to is this, that the humanistic scepticism, whose massive and yet

wavering reactions I am attempting to outline, responds to the dogmas of religion in the same manner as it responds to the whole tragic-comic spectacle of human life.

It is concerned with that larger and rarer beauty, the beauty that detaches itself, contour by contour, and colour by colour, from the drama of man's life upon the earth; from his pathetic attempts to give that life a unity, a dignity and graciousness, which in its mere chance-scattered elements it so often lacks.

Confronted with an idea like that of the Virgin Birth, or the Resurrection, or of Vicarious Atonement, such a mental temper is compelled to insist very emphatically that a thing *can* be beautiful while it is scientifically impossible and morally outrageous!

It *is* morally outrageous that a man's sins can be completely obliterated by the contemplation of Another's sacrifice. It is also irrational and unscientific. The metaphysical philosophy of Buddhism has recognized this in its formulation of the eminently reasonable and eminently ethical doctrine of "Karma."

But these unscientific and immoral aspects of Vicarious Atonement do not detract in the remotest degree from the sense of indescribable beauty which rises up before us, like a pillar of fire, from the strange, perverse, fantastic concep-

tion of One Man's dying in order that the wickedness of all men should be purged away!

If any rational-minded or ethical-minded critic of this strange doctrine declares that he finds more beauty in the philosophical notion of "Karma" than in this, it is impossible to convert him by any argument.

A vision of all the derelicts and abjects in the world, all the blighted and broken victims of their own wilful vice, suddenly receiving complete healing in one great Lethean wave of absolution, either strikes a person's æsthetic sense as more beautiful than any conceivable law of "Karma," or it does not. And if it does not, nothing that one can say in defence of it can make any difference.

The ultimate quality of beauty in the world differs in this very thing from truth and goodness; in that, while these latter can be justified by argument, beauty can never be justified by argument.

No one can be persuaded by logical reasoning to see why certain magical lines in Shakespeare or Keats are more lovely than certain clever psychological passages, say, in Browning or in Meredith. It is something that hits the mind with a direct impact, like the impact of ice or flame.

For the appeal of beauty is always an imagi-

native appeal; and there seems to be something about the very audacity of doctrines that deliberately break up the "cause-and-effect, two-and-two-make-four" determinism of nature which in itself stirs and arrests us, as if with a dim intimation of some immense inexplicable escape.

The thing I am trying to make clear is that for us Western nations there has come into being an organic background of solidified dream-myths which contain in them the accumulated strata of all our racial reactions to the universe. This background, created from what might be called the imaginative deposit of many centuries, issues in a massive and deep-rooted view of life which is as Western as we are ourselves. The accident that our sacred books, the accident that the personality of Jesus originated in the East does not affect the situation. We have westernized both Jesus and the Scriptures until the myth-structure that has emerged has little left in it of its original bias.

Out of the melancholy Prophet of Judæa we have created for ourselves a beautiful western god whose lineaments are touched by the sunlight of Greek seas, by the shadows of Celtic forests, by the silences of English pastures; whose dominant expression is full of a sweet, sane, earth-born hope; a hope against which all the metaphysical pessimism of the East can avail nothing.

And this massive and organic background of our days to which Greeks, Romans, Germans, French and English have all contributed their own indigenous poetry is something quite different from just a sanctimonious appeal to "save one's soul," something quite different from just a pseudo-scientific philosophy.

Gathered about the figure of a youthful god, born of an immaculate maid, this background of accumulated poetry impinges upon the most materialistic among us in a thousand unexpected ways.

And the curious thing is that its most touching and stirring appeals are often indirect and sideways, coming upon us suddenly and unaccountably when we least anticipate them, like the fleeting illumination of a dingy street by a wistful autumnal sun.

And when they do reach us, these intimations, they surprise us by being something quite different from "explanations" of the universe. They surprise us by being just a quick lovely heightening of all that is most secretly delicious in human intercourse, of all that is most enchanting in the by-paths of nature.

To say, as one hears young people so often say, "As for me I find *my* religion under the open sky" is to be a little unfair to the heathen element in the faith of our fathers. It is not only

of fauns and hamadryads that one is conscious in these solitary places. Something touches us when we see a group of cattle in the flickering shadows, a lonely traveller on the road against the sky-line, that has been itself touched long ago by the imagination that has made of men and animals and trees strange prototypes of a more than Platonic mystery; has made of the growing wheat the flesh of an immortal; has made of the rising juices and saps the blood of a god; has heightened the value of all sentient living things by enhancing the value of each individual soul.

Realizing in this way the angle from which we must regard mediæval dogma if we are to do justice to its inherent poetry, does it not become clear why our attitude towards broad-minded modern preachers is bound to be less sympathetic than our attitude to Roman or Anglican priests?

It may I think be said without contradiction that the grand doctrine upon which these modernists rely, in their strictures upon the irrationality of the old dogmas, is what they call "the Fatherhood of God."

Now the conception of God as an universal father is certainly due to the inspiration of Jesus.

But of all aspects of the teaching of Jesus it

is the one that wears the least well under the impact of life's experience.

Jesus himself seems at the last to have felt something like this when he uttered his famous cry "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" But the Christ that the generations have created out of old Syrian stories has detached himself more than we sometimes think from the illusion of the World-Father.

What man, in fact, has done is to invent a god of his own, a god of thwarted flesh and blood, in direct opposition to the "Creator" whose cruelties Jesus condoned.

The doctrine of the Incarnation is man's sublime excuse for the unknown forces that cause him to suffer. But the idea of a "Heavenly Father," held to so obstinately in the face of the world we know, has become something that is no longer beautiful.

And the reason why one feels oneself so much more affected by the mythology of the Roman and Anglican faith than by the philosophy of the Modernists is that the former tends to lay the chief stress upon Christ himself as a beautiful and wounded deity in a hostile world; while the latter keeps offering unctuous insults to all suffering hearts by its chatter about the goodness of the All-Powerful.

The difficult Athanasian doctrine of the triadic nature of the absolute is a projection "sub specie æternitatis" of the results of a certain very simple psychological observation.

Things *do* arrange themselves in *threes*; and one need not have indulged in any recondite Pythagoreanism to find endless examples of this natural peculiarity both in human nature and in nature. It is difficult to see how else they *could* arrange themselves; given the obscurity—except to pure mathematics—of all other dimensions save the three we visualize.

To correlate Christian mythology with Aristotelian logic it was necessary to personify this triadic aspect of things; but the moment has arrived—now that Aristotelian logic ceases to satisfy us—when this metaphysical aspect of our great legend becomes outworn and irrelevant.

As we have presumed to hint, the idea of a World-Father has already lost whatever beauty it may once have had; nor does it seem as if the idea of a World-Spirit is in a much better case.

Mystics and occultists assure us that this present era is in some especial sense the era of the Third Person of the Trinity.

If this is so it becomes only the more necessary to clear the path for a renaissance of the Second Person.

For while the idea of an Over-Soul will always lend itself to minds of a certain peculiar type, it must surely be clear that the mystery of beauty finds a much more touching embodiment in the worship of any sort of real human figure.

The wind "bloweth where it listeth" and all these spiritual breathings forth, out of the vasty deep, have a weird non-natural character that may be very good or very evil.

Demonic or divine, they have to do with certain terrible and drastic obsessions that over-pass in huge volcanic outbursts all those gentle, hardly-won rhythms of life, which depend on balance, on infinitely-delicate adjustments, on subtle discriminations.

When against untold odds, when in the face of incredible chances, the genius of generations of poets and saints, working with the blind instincts of humanity, have built up, fragment by fragment, piece by piece, an Ideal like that of Christ, it were surely an inhuman madness to subject this creation to the destructive tornadoes of prophetic inspiration.

The World-Father was a well-intentioned and consolatory speculation. The World-Spirit is a terrific and formidable obsession.

But the worship of Christ, the Son of Mary, will outlive them both because it touches a beauty in the system of things which they leave

untouched and unrealized—the beauty which does not lie in any apocryphal abyss but on the magical surface of normal human life.

The lovely and wistful atmosphere of the Religion of Christ is something entirely independent of the words of Jesus, something entirely independent of the personality of Jesus. The feeling produced in us when we hear the words, “and she brought forth her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger,” is a feeling that goes far beyond the emotion aroused by the idea of Jesus of Nazareth considered merely as a great and good man.

Into these familiar words has been injected, like some indescribable essence, all that fairy-like glamour, redemptive of life's suffering, which certain forms of earth-gendered craftsmanship, full of the scent of summer grass and the sweet smoke of winter logs, alone can give.

Not a man, not a woman among us, who has what we so beautifully call a *Christian name*, whether it be Hans, or Pierre, or Ivan; whether it be Anna, or Gretchen, or Mary, but must some time or another have felt something of this.

It is the reduction of life to its simplest terms; and then the heightening of it with the myrrh and cassia of pure poetry. It is a kind of diffused secular Mass, consecrating the very kitchen utensils, the very mud of the stables, with a

glamour homely as that of Grimm's Fairy Tales; with a magic tender as that of first love.

Our argument could be carried almost as far as this, that there is something in Christian mythology that the human race would be insane to let perish from their midst; and that this precious quality can be caught and savoured without so much as crossing the threshold of any consecrated building!

It is, in fact, in the intangible atmosphere which emanates from the quaint and curious poetry surrounding the Virgin Birth that the essence of Christianity is to be found, rather than in the hymning and praying at any definite hour, in any particular church.

What this book is seeking to suggest is that the Christ of the Virgin Birth, the mysterious God-Man, the son of Mary, has got himself *fused* in some peculiar way with a deep unmistakable change in the æsthetic sense itself of all our western nations.

A diffused perception of a new and subtle loveliness in the world, has come into being, extending even to the material and inanimate objects around us; and having only a faint pathetic association with the piety of the faithful.

The Christ of the Virgin Birth has in fact achieved the kind of creative miracle that all supreme works of art achieve; the miracle of

bringing into being a new appreciation of beauty; and not only a new appreciation, but certain actual *secrets* of beauty, such as, until it appeared, remained merely latent in the nature of the universe.

Nothing is harder than to define the precise quality of this new element; but it is certainly something that does not confine itself to human minds. It extends to stones and plants and trees. It extends to every smallest incident of our days; to the lighting of fires, to the washing of hands, to the breaking of bread. It saturates the very idea of love in the world, of the most amorous love as well as the most intellectualized.

Evil and sinister is that Puritan Heresy that has made of the pleasures of the senses something alien to the spirit of Christ; though it must be confessed that such a view is not without its justification in the "logoi" of the historic Jesus!

But the Christ of the Virgin Birth has liberated himself from the historic Jesus; and all the strange loveliness in the world which draws its life from Him, all the subtleties and nuances of poetry which depend upon Him, are liberated with His liberation from his gloomy moralistic perversion.

The "Idiot" of Dostoievsky, which of all modern works of art contains most of this new sense of beauty, by no means exhausts its possi-

bilities. It contains within it, this fresh perspective, many earth-bound and sun-saturated aspects of life which pass beyond the Dostoievsky world and enter the world of Shakespeare.

And what a thing it must be, this new feeling, when one thinks how different in their imaginative response of life both Shakespeare and Dostoievsky are, from any minds that contemplated existence *before* the Christ of the Virgin Birth got himself diffused through the troubled mirror of our experience!

One thing is certain; neither Dostoievsky nor Shakespeare would have displayed the remotest interest in these eloquent, shallow, sensational attempts to bring the old dogmas into conformity with what is called Progress.

What appealed to *them* in religion was the idea of some formidable *White Magic* that claimed to "crack Nature's moulds" and break up, from outside, "the thick rotundity o' the world." They would feel at once as we feel, that science and religion must be kept in completely different compartments of the human mind. They would feel, as we feel, that from any attempt to reconcile these two things the issue is neither scientific nor religious, but something altogether inferior to both; just a vague rhetorical emotionalism.

The magnetic influence of these old mediæval dogmas—crazy and extravagant as they are—ex-

tends among us like a relaxing, penetrating April mist.

The fact remains, however, that if it were not for the few still left who are genuine believers this mysterious influence would soon vanish away.

From those bowed and awe-struck heads, prostrate before the body and blood of their God-Man, a strange influence goes forth; an influence that carries with it a touch, a rumour, light as the breath of the first mornings of Spring, calm as the shadows of the hills in deep water.

That such a thing can only come from the faith of the simple lends to the whole phenomenon that kind of tragic beauty which only appears upon the earth when the evocation in question *might easily never have appeared at all*; and *has* only appeared at all by reason of the incredible encounter of certain chance-blown straws!

The Modernist's position seems to imply that the Christian faith emerges inevitably, as an evolutionary product, out of nature; and that, so emerging, it becomes a growing revelation of occult truth; a revelation that lends itself to the exigencies of all mystery-loving minds.

The position, on the contrary, advocated here is that Christianity has only appeared by a chance-gathered concentration of lucky historical acci-

dents; but that, once having appeared, there have rallied to its support all those floating instincts of human revolt against the natural order of things which without it might have gone down into oblivion unexpressed and unrealized.

It is not as if one were unaware of the naturalness of these modernistic attempts to soften down the mediæval dogmas; to make them correspond with the rapid progress of science.

One is not impervious to the reasonable urge that lies behind these attempts.

But because of what one knows of science itself it is impossible to regard this progress as infallible; nor its last up-to-date decree as any final pronouncement upon the mystery.

Preoccupied with the spectacle of things, one is naturally more interested in human nature than in chemical or biological theories; and the great mediæval dogmas seem to us—in spite of all their irrationality—to correspond to certain aspects of human nature that have not altered very much in the lapse of the centuries.

Many such aspects may not appear to be particularly beautiful to a taste which is careful to obliterate every pessimistic interpretation of life. But to a mind that responds to a darker, more sinister view of things, as well as to a more consolatory one, these ambiguous aspects fall into their place with the rest.

The Orphic, Mithraic, and Eleusinian Mysteries undoubtedly hinted at many of the imaginative conceptions in Christian dogma. The worship of Osiris must have anticipated many more. But it is in the blending of the race-vision of Jerusalem, Athens and Rome that the astounding doctrines of the Incarnation and the Resurrection managed to reach their human apogee.

And when we remember that these notions have emerged, not out of the lonely brains of semi-scientific philosophers, but out of the anonymous instincts of the race itself, it becomes possible enough that they may afford a clue to the hidden impulses of the universe quite as significant as the rational theories of individual thinkers.

No one really, in spite of all progress, knows any better what lies behind the dream of life than people did in the days of Job or in the days of Rameses.

Still over our heads and under our feet stretches the incredible monstrosity of boundless space. Still before us and behind us stretches the incredible monstrosity of boundless time. Still when we sink into our minds we find the movements of consciousness itself turning eternally in one and the same fatal circle.

Science reduces everything to invisible electric forces, mathematics to invisible logical entities;

but meanwhile the *visible earth* remains, brown and green and grey; and the darkness and the light make up the procession of our irreducible hours.

The metaphysicians hypostasize the processes of the human mind into unreal idolons. Out of the wavering mythologies created by poets, theologians build up complicated dogmatic systems. The priest conserves as sacrosanct what the prophet announces as inspired. And all the while, the natural-minded ordinary man, looking round upon the unsolved, unaltered mystery, remains sceptical, ironical, patient, silent!

One thing is certain. The vast material universe which we are compelled to contemplate out there in the void, stretching immeasurably to unthinkable horizons, *is not all there is*.

From the vantage-ground of some secret citadel in the depths of our being we are aware, beyond all doubt, that this particular spectacle does not exhaust the possibilities of being. But whether we, who know that this material universe *is not all*, will ever share, more fully than in our limited consciousness we are sharing now, these other levels of existence is a question beyond the reach of any human reply.

Vast cosmic purposes may be at work, completely unsympathetic to our natural cravings. Choosing us, using us, abusing us, in imperturb-

able indifference, they may be pursuing objects as far beyond our objects as ours are beyond those of midges and flies.

Towards these forces, which have summoned us forth from the deep, we have, as men and women, a perfect right to be hostile, to be vindictive, to be blasphemous, to be cynical. To worship these forces with tender solicitude is ridiculous. To prostrate ourselves before them in panic-terror is humiliating and degrading. To seek to propitiate them, to seek to get them "on one's side," is natural enough; but whether it is likely to make any difference is another matter!

We owe them nothing. *We did not ask to be born.* They deserve no more from us than the rain deserves when it wets us or the sun deserves when it dries us.

If we do have to invent incantations "to get them on our side" we do not love them the better for that, or admire them the more! The account is equal between us. They to their ends. We to our ends.

The notion that there is any grandeur in "doing their will" is a psychological illusion. The grandeur, if there is any, consists in defiance to their will; but even *that* grows wearisome with time; since, after all, these forces are so sub-human or so superhuman that even to "defy" them is waste of energy.

We touch just here upon what is really one of the deepest psychological alternatives in our lives. A conscious being can, like Job or Spinoza, make one supreme act of faith and take for granted that the Will of the Universe is worthy of being our will; or he can, like Prometheus, take for granted that the Will of the Universe is hostile and malicious.

The attitude more natural to the sceptical mind hesitates and wavers between these two extremes but probably in the end acquires the habit of regarding *any* "Will of the Universe" as conjectural and ambiguous.

What I have taken the liberty of calling "the religion of a sceptic" is, in other words, something very different from that self-complacent pose of philosophical rectitude which gives a kind of moral unction to the writings of so many philosophers.

The sceptical attitude I am describing has nothing in common with the moral pride of stoicism. The escape it finds from the evils of life—its sense of a beauty in things that is apart altogether from the end or purpose of things—is something fitful, wavering, inconstant. But inconstant though it is, when it does take possession of us it does so in such a manner as to lift us altogether out of the region of moral superiorities.

In the contemplation of it, in the breath and being of its quality, all differences between one human character and another are washed clean away.

In this respect the contemplation of beauty resembles the Love of Christ. And that is doubtless why it happens so often that between artists and saints there is found to be a strange and deep accord; while, to the rational duty-lover, both these types appear disordered and equivocal.

The thing that renders the whole argument a rather delicate one is the wide latitude we are giving to the interpretation of the word beauty. The popular notion of beauty—and such æsthetes as Oscar Wilde have done much to encourage the error—seems to confine this sacrosanct word to the more sensual impressions received from works of art, or received from the forms and colours of nature treated as material for works of art.

It is this narrowing down of beauty to sensuous impressions or at any rate to the imaginative rendering of sensuous impressions which has cast a kind of slur upon any life of purely æsthetic emotion.

In reality such a life of purged contemplation is, as both Plato and Aristotle held, the noblest life possible to the human soul. It is the one life

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which might be called entirely *disinterested*; for its rivals, in the sphere of benevolence and righteousness, are, as we have seen in the case of the great stoics, unable to forget a certain selfish repercussion of the feeling of moral superiority.

Re-create the response of Shakespeare to some street-scene or inn-yard-scene or tavern-scene; and then embody the response of Marcus Aurelius to the same situation.

The imagination of the former, reinforced by tenderness and humour, both of which can be used to an æsthetic end, sweeps the scene in question into its own place amid the motley panorama; and then forgets itself in pure disinterested enjoyment.

The mind of the latter, on the other hand, gathers itself together so as to retain its benevolent equanimity; but never loses, as it does so, its inherent moral self-consciousness.

Suppose the same two intelligences to be confronted by the approach of some religious procession.

The Shakespearean mind would flow easily and spontaneously, like a self-forgetful planetary mist, over the human pathos of what it beheld. It would even, so to speak, in its Protean adaptability, *become* what it beheld.

Whereas the mind of the Philosophical stoic would exhaust itself in a grave devoted effort

to be at the same time sympathetic and unruffled.

"There may or may not be gods," the first mind would say. "How strange, how beautiful, that such hallowed ecstasies should appear at all in this chance-driven world!"

"This popular worship of the gods," the second mind would say, "is doubtless an ignorant and superstitious expression of that Divine Order and Divine Wisdom that 'sweetly and strongly' regulate the universe."

The great festivals of the church are, as we have hinted before, vast grey milestones, set up upon the king's high-road along which all men have to travel.

One can pass them by without so much as turning one's head; and for each person they have different associations; but the mere sight of them there, as we move forward, is something that gathers our days into a fulfilled pattern, something that enables us to see the track we have made, up hill, down dale, "by paved fountain and by rushy brook," as if from the vantage-ground of a mountain-ridge.

And it is the same with the contemplation of such historic dogmas as that of the Virgin Birth or the Resurrection. To attempt to modernize these dogmas is to sacrifice all the sweet, rich, dim encrustation of racial memories with which, one by one, they are inscribed.

It is to scrape off, as it were, with a fanatical puritan chisel, all those mysterious hieroglyphs, created by snow and hail and sleet and vapour, that have rendered these monuments of the way-side something different from what they were at the beginning!

What touches us in them now, what comes to us from them now, is indeed far more precious than any moral urge.

It is nothing less than a sudden magical sense of the unspeakable pathos of human life upon the earth; a sense of all it means, of all it implies, just simply to be a man born of a woman upon this nameless satellite of a nameless star!

And it is of the very nature of things that this sense can only come from doctrines that can at least be *regarded* as actual historic facts. It can never come from mere metaphysical symbols.

To insist therefore in converting these touching imaginary "facts" into philosophical parables is just that peculiar kind of outrage upon our æsthetic sense which broad-minded preachers are always making and which might be described as "the bad manners of the soul."

What our instinctive human nature demands is mythology not theology. Without the concrete mythopœic element in tradition, theology is as dead as the science of the Aztecs.

With the mythopœic element undisturbed we

can be as sceptical as we please as to the modicum of rational truth contained in such "facts." No scepticism can spoil their beauty because their beauty has become part of the life of the race.

Whatever they once were, they have gathered to themselves now that particular kind of "truth" that is more important than scientific discovery, the "truth," in other words, of a work of art.

What is this truth that is truer than reality; this reality that is truer than any observed law or sequence of laws?

It is something that once did not exist, but now does exist. It is something that has literally been created out of nothing; something that, once created, obtains for itself a subtle re-creative energy of its own.

The figure of Hamlet is more real in a very profound sense than many generations of actual living persons. The figure of Don Quixote is more tangible to our imagination than all the people who actually were born, went mad, and died, in the days of Don John of Austria.

Not for one moment need it be supposed that the drift of this pleading for an intelligent human piety implies any encouragement to obscurantists and reactionaries.

On the contrary, it is the stupidity of the "broad-minded" that betrays sensitive and imag-

inactive spirits, again and again, into the hands of these assassins of freedom.

What one has to do is to find not *less* beauty, but *more* beauty, than the reactionaries themselves are able to find in these real-unreal myths.

The mere fact that such reactionaries are so perturbed about "the fate of their souls" debars them from enjoying the enchanted moonlight of these sacred groves.

The morbid question "Am I saved?" is like a dark and criminal cap drawn over a person's face just at the moment when the landscape before him lies floating in a wavering light as lovely as that of a great diffused sea-pearl.

The history of the human race, as far as it touches the happiness and unhappiness of individual lives, has yet to be written.

There are moments in the days of all men and women when the things of their life fall suddenly and strangely into a new focus, the name whereof, the clue whereto, must for ever remain unuttered.

But these are the moments when a strange justification of all that we have endured seems on the verge of being realized.

Such moments can in no sense be regarded as rational. They bear only a very faint and indirect relation to what we call moral issues. The most rarefied essence of love itself is so trans-

figured at such hours as to be scarcely recognizable. What these experiences seem to suggest is the presence of something in the world beyond the ordinary laws of nature.

And yet they have actually arrived, silently, stealthily, imperceptibly, on wings that made no stir, on feet that made no sound, to all men and to all women, from the dawn of history!

There must be a vast recording sensitive-plate of such revelations—for nothing in the universe perishes *all*—somewhere, hidden from every search.

And what if these accumulated moments, moments realized by turbaned heads in the desert, by shaven heads in China, by fur-capped heads in the Arctic circle, by bent laborious heads in the workshops of London and Berlin and New York, have had, all down the ages, the power of flowing magically together, of interpenetrating one another; so that when, for this cause or for that, or by the mere motions of pure unguessed-at chance, such a vision comes to any living person, it is as if such a person drew upon a vast secret planetary memory, the mere contact with which can heal and redeem?

And what if this great sensitive-plate, upon which are inscribed these moments, be the very under-sea, the very sublunary floor, of beauty itself?

If so, one can well understand how it comes about that to those who reject the theological or philosophical view of the Birth of Christ or the Resurrection of Christ, there yet may come a thrill from the old traditional words about these things such as no rational explanation can destroy.

Grant that these things are no more than imaginary creations of the human mind. They have associated themselves so long with the rarest visions of that mind; they have been used so often, as leaden plummets, to sound the mysterious ocean of nature, that it may well be a marvel if there does not hang about them certain glittering scales and mystic phosphorescence of the unknown Deep.

He would be grossly misinterpreting the spirit of this "apologia" who used its arguments to commit any young man or any young woman to the restraints of a definite religious communion.

But he would be also misunderstanding it who did not realize that the familiar words of the old tradition have become by long usage part of the eternal secular ritual, old as the hills and deep as the roots thereof, by which man has learned to heighten the life of man.

"And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus that all the world should be taxed . . .

"And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

"And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judæa, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem . . .

"To be taxed with Mary, his espoused wife, being great with child.

"And so it was that while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

"And she brought forth her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger . . ."

In the hour when these words shall be read, and shall produce no impression upon the mind that reads them except the emotion of faith or the emotion of denial, there will have been something lost, more precious than a king's ransom, from the secret sensitive-plate of the memory of mankind.

"Born of the Virgin Mary . . . on the third day he rose from the dead. . . ."

It needs not the loyalty of the orthodox; it needs not the rationality of the unorthodox; for us to become aware, as we chance upon this, that in the dogmas of the simplest of the creeds there is a poetry that will survive the rise and fall of many nations; a poetry that belongs, by

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the mere fact of its having appeared in the world at all, to the hands that receive the child from the womb, to the heads that bow down over the filled-up grave.

THE END





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